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"Local Laramie" Follow-Up Talks
1st Day - Planning
SELECTION OF MATERIALS

Selection of material is the toughest, most self-disciplining part of the whole job of writing. It's tough because you have to think! It's self-disciplining because you have to make decisions. And selection of material is the most important part of any writing effort because it determines what you're going to say.

You face this job of selection in any piece of writing....whether you're writing a popular article or booklet for farm people, a semi-technical report for county agents or a technical paper for fellow scientists.

You recall Maurice Haag's Master's thesis on "Weaknesses in Technical Writing." Some of his comments apply to our subject of selection--only he calls it outline and structure. Your outline and structure, of course, is determined by your selection of information.

Outline and structure was one of the major areas where the 100 manuscripts which Mr. Haag studied fell short of what they might have been. That's what the reviewers said. The titles were unsatisfactory, introductions were misleading, logical development was weak in some cases, and certain facts were overemphasized or there was some tendency to wander from the subject. Remember, these are reviewers' comments.

In his discussion, Mr. Haag says: "There is much evidence in the 100 papers under study that faults in outline and structure interfered frequently with the efficient communication of ideas. The reviewers were not particularly trained or coached to watch for such faults, but they did call attention to this kind of weakness specifically and often. In addition, many of the reviewers's comments which were classified under other headings might easily have been placed under outline and structure. And because faults of this kind are harder to identify and correct, there is good reason to think that they are even more prevalent than is indicated by the comments of the reviewers. This area of weakness is one which is too often neglected, and when it is in reality one of the two or three areas most in need of attention."

These papers, you recall, were sent into the Agronomy Journal. Mr. Haag makes this other pointed observation in his conclusions: "There is no reason to believe that these manuscripts differ in any great degree from other papers in the general scientific field."

All this applies, of course, to scientific papers. But what about popular articles written by Extension folks for an audience of farm people? While we don't have any studies like Mr. Haag's, it's probably pretty safe to assume that almost every report could be improved by more careful selection of information. Here's one example: Bill Ward, Extension Editor at Cornell, has written a textbook for a beginning course in ag journalism in college. It's a normal size book--350 pages. But the original manuscript was twice that long. He chopped his copy in half.....an editor practicing what he preaches about selecting his information.

How can we choose the important findings? How can we skim the cream from the milk---separate the wheat from the chaff? How can we pack our report full of lean, red meat, instead of lots of waste fat? Let me borrow a slogan straight from Laramie here. It's this:

Keep your eye on the BIG potatoes!

So let's remember the slogan, Pick the BIG potatoes.

You recall in the preceding topic we talked about choosing your audience. Well, we can "Choose the BIG potatoes" for any audience. The principle applies, whether we're aiming at scientists, county agents, 4-H girls, ranchers, fertilizer dealers or local bankers. We can still "Pick the BIG potatoes" from our information, as it applies to that particular group which is our audience.

Let's talk for just a minute about a scientist writing for fellow scientists in a technical report. Now, by purpose and intent, technical papers are supposed to be complete and detailed. They are the permanent, full record of that research for anyone's future reference. At the same time, from working off and on with scientists during nine years, I'd venture the opinion that probably even in a technical report, authors of necessity are forced to "Pick the BIG potatoes" to some extent. A good many research projects provide such a mountain of data that it would require volumes to publish it all.

Moreover, remember Mr. Haag's comment ".....faults in outline and structure interfered frequently with the efficient communication of ideas." As scientists, ask yourself, "Have I 'picked the BIG potatoes' carefully enough in my reports so as not to slow down and confuse my readers, my fellow scientists?" Let's face up to that question. Or turn that question around a bit. How many of you scientists are all caught up with reading in your technical journals? Are you up-to-date or behind in your professional reading? Probably behind, just like many others, largely because of so many other calls on your time--just plain being so busy. The same thing is true in keeping up to date on latest developments in communications.

At the same time, might part of the answer be simply this--that authors have not taken enough care and time to carefully "Pick the BIG potatoes?" This weakness forces you as reader to struggle though a report that otherwise might have been easier to understand. You've worked harder than need be, wasted some of your time and maybe even mis-understood the report to some extent. Remember your fellow scientists: They're busy men too. The easier and clearer you can make it for them to understand your own technical reports, the more good you're doing for yourself. In technical papers as elsewhere, it pays to "Pick the BIG potatoes."

Just four other suggestions on scientific reports:

(1) To get started a little easier with an introduction, ask yourself this question: Why did I make the study in the first place? Surely you tied your work in with some current problem. So why not start from there? Explain how your study relates to that current problem.

(2) This one deals with method. Of course you must outline your method because it provides the basis for accuracy. If it is short, it might well follow the introduction. But if it is long and involved, why not hold it for appendix A? There it's available for review but won't hinder the person not interested. This is especially necessary if your report is a semi-popular one.

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(3) As for presentation here's where the hard work begins. Here's where we start "Picking the BIG potatoes." The head of one of USDA's economic units says the difficulty with most papers coming to his attention is this: The author did not take the time and trouble to sort out and differentiate between the important and the less important. He didn't "Pick the BIG potatoes." He didn't pull his material into focus. He wrote too long. And then, he added, they just don't work hard enough at writing.

That, for USDA economic writers. I don't know if that judgment might apply on this campus--you folks can answer that. It's worth looking into seriously.

Most of your scientific findings probably are in the form of basic tables. But we still want to stress the BIG potatoes--the facts that are most significant, most important. So let's take from our basic tables the most significant data and build our text around them. Then let's place the basic tables in appendix B where they won't have a chance to bog us down in detail.

(4) Finally accept the responsibility for interpretation--what does it all mean. Don't leave your reader hanging in mid-air, especially if it's a semi-popular or popular general farm audience. Conclusions complete the cycle: You have studied, you have found out, and here is what it means. And don't hide behind the excuse of "Let the reader figure it out for himself--what it all means." He may miss the point completely. From months of studying the problem, you're in the best position to interpret your findings--to point up what it all means. You complete your task when you accept this responsibility.

So much for "Picking the BIG potatoes" for scientific reports. Now how about popular reports for farm people and John Q. Public?

We have one big advantage over other groups trying to "sell" their message to the public. We have a conditioned audience. They're already "sold" on our product--reliable farm information. They're conditioned to accept the recommendations. Why? Because of its source. Because of (name of college) printed on the front cover. Almost 100 years of land-grant college service and millions of dollars, both federal and state, invested in research and education among farm people--these have established the acceptability of your college as trustworthy and reliable. We're blessed with an extremely valuable, huge chunk of public goodwill. It promotes our work immeasurably.

In writing for this conditioned audience of people, we can "Pick the BIG potatoes" for them by following two important steps: (1) Identify yourself with one particular farmer in your audience; think and write in his terms: put yourself in his place; and (2) Identify yourself with his problem or problems. Talk with him and listen to him. In this way you can find out what he wants to know--and what he needs to know. These two points really boil down to this: Find the spot that itches and then scratch it.

We've covered a good bit of ground on this topic of "Choosing Your Information." (Briefly summarize high points). But if you remember only one point from this talk, remember this: "Pick the BIG potatoes." That's the BIG potato of this talk. "Pick the Big potatoes."



